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Book Launch: *My Prison, My Home: One Woman's Story of Captivity in Iran* by Haleh Esfandiari

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
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Scholars, Congressmen, journalists, students, friends and family all convened at the Woodrow Wilson International Center to commemorate the publication of **Haleh Esfandiari's** new book, "My Prison, My Home: One Woman's Story of Captivity in Iran." The book describes her terrifying and inspirational story of survival in Iran's notorious Evin Prison. Deputy Director of the Wilson Center, **Michael Van Dusen**, called the event a "bittersweet occasion" that both celebrated her freedom and recalled the darkest hours of her confinement. Founder of the Wilson Center, **Ambassador Joseph Gildenhorn**, then introduced Esfandiari as a "very special woman."

Esfandiari began by thanking those members of the "massive international campaign" who fought for her freedom, acknowledging that she would not be "here today without them." Before delving into her personal story, she reminded the audience of the "current clash between reform and reaction inside Iran's ruling class" that has unknown numbers of detainees languishing in Iranian prison, explaining the regime uses such false arrests to validate the "paranoia that prevails [...] regarding American intentions towards Iran." She urged the audience to "continue to speak out" in their name.

Esfandiari then embarked on her own story of detainment, interrogation, isolation and perseverance in Iran's Evin prison. While visiting her mother in Tehran, Esfandiari was robbed at knifepoint and lost her passport. When she applied for new travel documents, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence put her under effective house arrest for purported espionage and anti-government agitation. Months of interrogation in Iranian bureaucratic limbo ensued, until one "glorious Tehran spring day" she was summoned to the Intelligence Ministry and promptly arrested.

Arriving at the infamous Evin prison, Esfandiari recalled how "disorientating and humiliating" it was to rely on her captors to lead her to her cell while blindfolded. The cell door shut with a "quiet click that resounded like thunder" in her psyche as she gained awareness of her surroundings. The small patch of sky visible through the tiny window was overwhelmed by the glaring fluorescent lights above, bulbs that shined so brightly 24 hours a day that they eventually began to damage Esfandiari's vision. Looking down, Esfandiari found the mass of blankets that would serve as her bed for nearly four months. The fear of lice compelled her to wash them as frequently as allowed. Conspicuously missing were a clock and a pillow.

The Iranian Intelligence officers subjected Esfandiari to hours of "intimidating and menacing" interrogation daily. Never allowed to see her interrogator's face, she was forced to speak to a concrete wall. Her interrogators fixated on "unraveling" a mass conspiracy of U.S. meddling in Iranian affairs, tying together the Woodrow Wilson Center, the CIA, and Esfandiari together in a nefarious plot to overthrow the Islamic regime. It had never occurred to Esfandiari that a 67 year old grandmother

barely five feet tall could be any threat to the most powerful country in the region. But nonetheless baseless accusations continued to fly as the interrogators sought to wear down their prisoner and eventually catch some incriminating discrepancy in her testimony.

But Esfandiari developed a disciplined routine to maintain her morale, mind and body. Every evening she replayed the day's interrogation in her mind, predicting potential traps, reviewing every question and anticipating what the next day might bring. As time allowed, she wrote two books in her head, drawing out arguments and mentally arranging them into chapters and sections. Later during her imprisonment, she gained access to a small collection of books, including Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Graham Greene. Meanwhile, she tried to maintain physical fitness by using filled water bottles for pilates, but estimates her weight eventually fell to a mere 85 pounds. When her emotions overwhelmed her, she tried to cry in the shower or under the sheets to prevent her captors from seeing her suffering.

Her biggest test came when she finally gave in to demands to be filmed on camera. Over the years, she had seen many of her friends and colleagues who were subjected to interrogation, broken and forced to confess to non-existent crimes on camera. It was now her turn. Even though she did not incriminate herself or anyone else, the filming was "one of [her] worst moments" and she felt "soiled, somehow dirty by the experience" afterwards. She still does not know how the regime manipulated her testimony to use for its own purposes.

So continued the mind games until Esfandiari saw the third full moon since her arrest. Realizing she had survived three months of prison, she decided she will soon have no choice but to begin a hunger strike, reasoning her captors will "either let [her] die or let [her] go." Luckily, she was never forced down such a path. As suddenly as she was arrested, she was released on bail, as significant lobbying by her supporters in America and Iran finally prevailed. Sitting on the tarmac waiting for her plane to depart Tehran's airport, she once more heard the click of a door shutting, but this time it signaled her return to freedom. As the airplane lifted off the runway, she "said so long to Iran, not goodbye."

During the question and answer session, the former Minister of Women's Affairs to Imperial Iran, **Mahnaz Afkhami**, asked Esfandiari how she managed to not break down during the filming as so many others have under similar circumstances. Esfandiari replied that she constantly reminded herself that she had led a wonderful life and career, and that she had nothing to hide of her transparent work for the Wilson Center. Asked whether scholars should attend a UN annual dinner when **President Ahmadinejad** attends the upcoming General Assembly meeting, Esfandiari replied that it is a personal decision for everyone, and that personally, she would not go but of course she is not invited. When asked whether the U.S. should engage Iran to the potential detriment of the reform movement, Esfandiari reminded the audience that only three days after her release she held a press conference encouraging engagement with Iran and suggested President Obama's incremental steps and avoidance of meddling has been "very effective."

Finally, Esfandiari was asked about the status of women in Iran, specifically President Ahmadinejad's recent nomination of three women and eventual confirmation of one woman to his cabinet. Esfandiari explained that women in Iran want the same rights as men, and that female ministers can serve as important role models. But the one woman confirmed to the cabinet is "very conservative," having even suggested segregating medical treatment of men and women. Furthermore, female cabinet members are not an innovation of Ahmadinejad. She reminded us there were two female cabinet members in pre-1979 Iran and therefore Ahmadinejad is thirty years too late. Nonetheless, she views the development as a "welcome step" as a new precedent within the Islamic Republic.